

Life Office Management Association

**A
Guide
To
More
Effective
Interviewing**

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A Guide To More Effective Interviewing

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Introduction

Almost everyone knows why we interview prospective employees: to reduce the chances of putting a round peg in a square hole. Yet many times mistakes are made, and sometimes someone is hired who doesn't work out. Oftentimes, more careful interviewing could prevent this.

Supervisors and managers have a very exacting assignment whenever they have to interview a prospective employee. Personnel tries to refer people who meet the general requirements of the job. Yet, it is the department that has to find out specifics and make the final decision. The primary tool for doing this is the interview.

Interviewing is much more than two people holding a pleasant conversation. Too many times, we are overly influenced by the "nice guy" or the "pretty face." Too many times, we hire a genius to do a relatively simple job and then wonder why he or she quits a short time later. Too many times, we prefer the Ivy League graduate to one from a state college or the suburban school product to a student from the city. Too many times, we hire someone because we like them personally and neglect to make sure they can do the job.

Have you ever put words into an applicant's mouth? . . . "Do you really think you can do the work here?" (Not many applicants will say "no.")

Have you ever monopolized the interview so much that all you really got out of the applicant were "yes" and "no" answers?

Have you ever discovered, after an interview, that most of the questions you asked were answered on the application or resume?

Have you ever interviewed and hired someone with whom you had mutual interests, similar backgrounds, a good rapport, etc.—and then had to terminate the person 6 months later?

Have you ever been so particular that a job stayed open for months? And then the person who finally met all your requirements became disenchanted soon after employment?

These are just a few of the mistakes that are made unknowingly. Hopefully, this booklet will serve as a guide to help eliminate some of them.

Keep in mind that the more experienced and higher level an applicant is, the more thorough the interview should be. Interviewing an experienced programmer can and should be quite a different experience from interviewing a lower-level clerk, and the questions that are asked should reflect this.

Naturally, you won't be able to cover everything mentioned in this booklet in one interview, but if you can utilize some of the suggestions, the effectiveness of employment interviews should be increased.

Chapter 1 Before the Interview

There are several things to think about before conducting a department interview, but the key is *to be ready*. Remember that the better prepared you are, the smoother the interview will go and the more information you'll get.

What the Interview Can and Cannot Accomplish

An interview is a chance to solicit relevant information in confidence. (But don't duplicate efforts of personnel and/or the application or resume.)

It is a chance to observe and evaluate how an individual acts, interacts and reacts.

It usually is the single, most important step in deciding whether or not an applicant should be hired.

It should not be viewed as a time to make friends.

Don't expect to make judgments about the presence or absence of certain character traits like integrity, loyalty or honesty. Such qualities are not readily apparent in an employment interview.

Reviewing the Resume (Application)

The resume is the applicant's way of telling you about himself or herself. Read it carefully.

Keep in mind that phrases such as "knowledge of," "exposure to," "assisted in" and "supervised" can often be misleading. Question the applicant carefully so that these phrases are explained to your own satisfaction.

Beware of the resume that concentrates on trivia.

Look for a pattern of job enrichment or enlargement. If a person has changed jobs, there should be logical reasons.

Circle or check (don't rely on your memory) items on the resume or application which raise questions in your mind. (But make sure personnel has not already answered them for you in the screening interview.)

Write down other questions which come to mind while reading the resume or application. Writing down these queries guarantees that you won't forget to ask anything important, and it also tends to make the interview go more smoothly.

The Time and Place

Try to have a relatively quiet place and make sure you won't be interrupted. (Have someone answer your phone for you.)

Allow enough time. An applicant can easily tell when you're rushed, no matter how well you disguise it.

Don't keep an applicant waiting.

Know What You Need

Be familiar with the job to be filled.

Don't overhire. If you need a statistical clerk, don't hire an actuary.

Don't underhire. If there's a genuine need for a particular skill, don't settle for less. Where possible, don't let the pressure of a long-standing opening influence you.

Don't hire from outside the company if someone from within has the proper qualifications.

Be prepared to hire a round peg for a round hole. Match the personality and aspirations (as well as the ability) to the job.

Setting a Game Plan

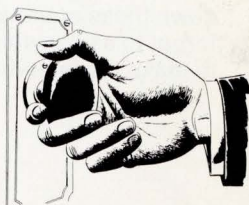
Don't duplicate what personnel has done. In most cases, they will check with you before the interview and let you know what they've discovered about the applicant.

Prepare your questions to get significant information, not unrelated data. Don't wait until the interview starts. It's helpful to jot down questions beforehand.

Enter the interview with an open mind. If you are about to talk with an applicant from XYZ Corporation, and everyone you've met from that company has been a poor worker, don't assume that the applicant also will be inadequate.

Resolve to avoid first impressions; they are often misleading and incorrect.

Ask questions that are not answerable with a simple "yes" or "no."



Chapter 2 The Interview Itself

Beginning the Interview

Greet the applicant enthusiastically and appear happy to see him or her.

Try to put the applicant at ease. Begin with small talk and easy questions; don't put the person on the spot right away.

Avoid first impressions. Try not to make a decision *during* the interview.

Let the applicant do the talking (about 75 percent of the time). Listen intently.

Your Questions Should Dig Deep

Finding out *what* has happened is important, but discovering *why* is often more significant.

If you can find out under what circumstances incidents occurred, you can begin to predict whether or not they'll happen again.

Listen carefully to the way an applicant answers a question. It can often tell you a lot more than the answer. Applicants will be enthusiastic about things they do well.

Find out whether an applicant wants to succeed or merely wants to avoid failure.

Discover how an individual learned what he knows. Learning by thorough understanding (which takes longer) is better than learning by memorization.

Investigate job history carefully. Be wary of an individual who has not increased either his or her scope of responsibility or workload.

Success and failure are relative. Try to find out what measure the applicant uses rather than using your own value system. (A "C" in physics may be a success to one person but not to another.)

Look for frustrations (and reasons for them) in previous business environments; then determine whether or not the individual will run into them again at your company.

Investigate educational background, but be sure to find out more than just grade-point average.

Don't take an applicant's word for critical information. If he or she says he can program in PL/1, make sure. Personnel cannot always determine the validity of technical information.

Watch for enthusiasm—it's an obvious key to likes and dislikes.

Major Areas of Exploration

Qualifications, education, career goals, ability and potential, motivations, needs, attitudes, adaptability, achievements to date.

Some Sample Categories and Questions

(Remember to tailor the type of questions to the level of job for which you're interviewing.)

Work History and Job Responsibilities

Tell me about your last job.

Describe a typical day at your last job.

What did you enjoy doing most (least) on your last job? Why?

What kind of decisions did you make?

Among the supervisors you have had since you have been working, which one, in your opinion, was the best? Why?

What sort of relationship did you have with your boss at your last job?

What are you most proud of during your working career to date?

What would your ideal job be?

Do you think you've been effective at your job? Why? (Why not?)

Where do you fit in your company's current organizational structure?

Educational Background

Why did you go to college? (graduate school, trade school, etc.)

Do you feel your grade-point average is representative of your ability? Why? (Why not?)

Do you plan to continue your education? Why? (Why not?)

What extracurricular activities did you enjoy most? How much time did you spend on them?

Did you help finance your own education? How and why?

What did you get out of school? Is that what you wanted?

Looking back over your "education years," what are you most proud of?



Motivation (drive)

Why are you looking for a job? (a new job?)

What attracted you to your last (current) job?

What do you do in your spare time?

Have you set out a "career plan" for yourself?

If so, what is it and why have you chosen to follow it?

What do you think will mean the difference for you between being a success and being an also-ran? Why?

What has been your greatest success to date? How did it happen?

What appeals to you about this company?

What have you done during the past 2 years to improve yourself?

What do you want out of life?

Attitudes and Feelings

Describe your last company to me. What kind of atmosphere prevailed there?

What did you like most about your last job?

What type of person annoys you the most?

What type of working atmosphere do you feel is most productive?

What are your greatest strengths and weaknesses? What are you doing to improve these weaknesses?

Are you a thinker, a planner or a doer? Why? Give some examples to support your answer.

What factors have contributed most to your development to date?

Is there anything that has kept you from moving ahead faster? If so, what?

Is there anything else that you think I should know about you and/or your qualifications?

Ending the Interview

The latter part of the interview should involve "selling" the applicant. Don't leave it out. Tell him or her about the good and the bad points of the job. Explain any unique features of the job, such as heavy overtime at particular times of the year.

If you're favorably impressed, tell the applicant (but don't be optimistic to everyone).

If you're not sure about the applicant, indicate that you have other people to interview, that you enjoyed talking with him or her and that personnel will be getting back to him as soon as all the interviews are completed.

If you're not interested, don't lie! You don't have to reject the applicant on the spot (personnel can do it for you), but don't give false impressions—it's very bad public relations. Simply thank the applicant for coming and say that personnel will get back to him shortly.

If you're having trouble ending an interview tactfully, try one of the following suggestions:

Look at your watch.

If you've been taking notes, put down your pad and pencil.

If you've been wearing glasses, take them off and put them in your pocket.

As a last resort, refer to another appointment you have in "a few minutes."

At the very end of the interview be positive, stand up, shake hands and walk the applicant to the door (or back to personnel, depending upon set arrangements). Remember that even if the person is not hired, he will probably convey his impressions about the company to others.



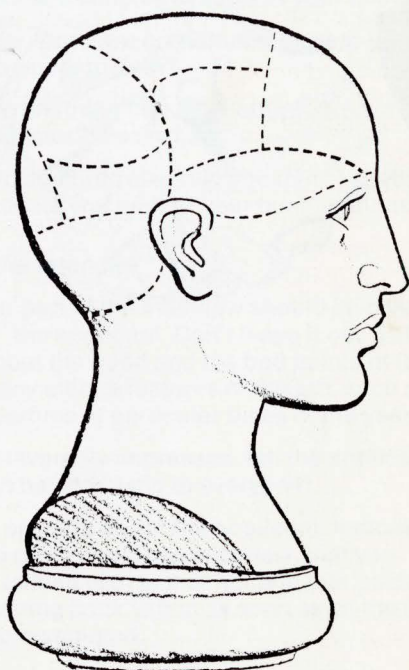
Chapter 3 After the Interview

Don't rely upon your memory. Immediately after the applicant leaves, write down any relevant, important information that you learned during the interview. If the applicant is not qualified, write down the reasons why. Don't even accept a telephone call until your thoughts are down on paper.

Try to reach a decision within a reasonable period of time. Talented applicants get other offers and usually aren't available for too long.

Don't be afraid to hire the first person you meet if he or she meets your criteria. You can hit a home run on the first pitch as well as on any other.

Make sure you know what followup action you are expected to take. Check with the personnel department if you have any questions. If it is your job to check references, there is one cardinal rule to follow: Never contact an applicant's current employer unless you have his or her permission.



Chapter 4 Some Thoughts on Discrimination

It is illegal to discriminate on the basis of race, sex, age, religion, marital status or ethnic background. This has been interpreted by the courts to mean that unintentional discrimination is just as unlawful as intentional discrimination. Naturally, any question which directly or indirectly touches upon any of these factors must be scrupulously avoided.

Because it is easy to exhibit discriminatory interview techniques unintentionally, you should keep the following things in mind:

- There should be job-related reasons for all questions, that is, your questions should cover subjects which will get the applicant talking about specific qualifications for the job. An example of the kind of question you should not ask because it has no bearing on an applicant's suitability for a job is, "What do you do on Sunday?"
- Questions should be interchangeable. For instance, any question asked of a female applicant and not asked of a male is evidence of discrimination (i.e., questions about children, marital plans, child care arrangements, etc.) .
- Evidence of discrimination can also be exhibited by any statement or implication by the interviewer of belief in minority stereotypes. Examples include: women are too emotional; women should not travel alone; married people are more stable than single people, etc.

Most of us are aware of the more blatant effects of discrimination, but there are some subtle ones that ought to be taken into consideration if candidates are to be evaluated properly. For instance, some minority and female applicants may not exhibit the "polish" and confidence that makes a candidate truly impressive during an interview. Being a good interviewee is a skill that can be acquired; it can also charm an interviewer into making an unsound decision. Applicants who have previously encountered prejudice at other companies may not be confident that an interviewer is unbiased, and they may not have developed the poise and self-possession that interviewers prize.

Keep in mind that the applicant who has not yet learned the game of interviewing can have as much or more to offer than the polished professional.

In other words, during an interview, have as open a mind as possible. View the candidate as just that—a candidate. Don't look at the person across from you as white or black, male or female, young or old. Consider all applicants equal until they prove themselves otherwise.

Remember, if a question you ask an applicant is construed by him or her as discriminatory, the *company* is accountable for your actions.

Conclusion

Use this booklet and its suggestions as a guide, not as a rule book. Use it to conduct a smooth and thorough interview, not a “third-degree” investigation.

If it enables you to gain deeper insight into the applicants you meet, if it improves your ability to select the right person for the job—then it has served its purpose well.

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